

Histories of the Protestant Reformation identify three major strands of religious figures and movements: the Lutheran Reformation led by Martin Luther, the Reformed Church with spokesmen John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli and the Anabaptists of the Radical Reformation. Baptists are another group that emerged out of the Protestant Reformation.<sup>1</sup> These General Baptists of English descent, led by Thomas Helwys, came out of the Church of England's Puritan-Separatist movement in the early seventeenth century. Martin Luther, John Calvin, the Anabaptists and the General Baptists all played important roles in the development of religious liberty. Each adopted models for understanding the relationship between church and state which are still relevant over four hundred years later. This paper seeks to analyze these models and their significance to the modern conception of religious liberty.

### **Martin Luther**

During the medieval period, the “doctrine of two estates” was developed by leaders in the Roman Catholic Church. According to this doctrine, clergy belonged to the “spiritual estate” and the laity to the “temporal estate.” Although the spiritual estate could and often did interfere in the affairs of the temporal estate, the temporal was forbidden from interfering with the spiritual.<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther strongly disagreed. In the early sixteenth century, he declared that three Roman walls had to come tumbling down: the elevation of the clergy over the laity, the assertion that only the Pope was competent to interpret Scripture, and the claim that only the Pope could convene a church council. Luther attacked these church traditions and argued that the Bible taught that all Christian believers, not merely clergy belonging to the spiritual estate, were free to be priests

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<sup>1</sup> Due to space restraints, this paper will not be able to focus on Ulrich Zwingli. For a survey of Zwingli's church-state views, see W.P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Stephens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Reformation – A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007), 223.

before God as well as responsible to be priests for God.<sup>3</sup> According to Luther, “all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference between them except that of office.”<sup>4</sup> This New Testament doctrine, firmly rooted in the Old Testament, came to be known as the “priesthood of all believers” and was fundamental to the foundation of the Protestant Reformation.<sup>5</sup>

Once Luther abolished the medieval distinction between the “temporal” and “spiritual estates,” he proceeded to develop an alternate theory of spheres of authority, based upon a distinction between the “Two Kingdoms.” Founded upon an exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) and Romans 13, Luther’s “Two Kingdoms” theory argues that there exists two kingdoms: the Kingdom of God in which Christians dwell and which is governed by the Gospel, and the Kingdom of the World where evil exists and the law must rule. God rules both kingdoms.<sup>6</sup>

Luther believed that both Kingdoms were ordained by God. Luther asserted that the civil government was strictly limited to the secular sphere or Kingdom of the World. This kingdom has no authority in matters of doctrine and concerns only the affairs of the world, the things of Caesar rather than of God. He felt it necessary to make clear distinctions between the two Kingdoms.

According to Luther,

God’s kingdom is a kingdom of grace and mercy, not of wrath and punishment. In it there is only forgiveness, consideration for one another, love, service the doing of good, peace joy, etc. But the kingdom of the world is a kingdom of wrath and severity. In it there is only punishment, repression, judgment and condemnation to restrain the wicked and protect the good.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, “An Appeal to the Ruling Class of German Nobility,” in *Readings in Christian Thought*, ed. Hugh Kerr (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 142-145. See also Leonore Siegele Wensckewitz, “Priesthood of All Believers,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 350-351.

<sup>4</sup> McGrath, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Reformation*, 223.

<sup>5</sup> Luther, 142-145.

<sup>6</sup> Ernest K. Pasichiel, “Martin Luther’s Theology of the Civil Authority,” *Didaskalia* 11, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 25-26.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 30-31.

Thus, while God rules his kingdom and the church through the gospel, He rules the Kingdom of the World through human authorities.<sup>8</sup> For Luther, whether the human authorities were Christian was a secondary question. God could rule justly through unbelieving but just leaders. However, Luther consistently insisted that the civil magistrate had no authority over the Christian conscience.<sup>9</sup>

Without question, Luther's rediscovery of the "priesthood of all believers" was an invaluable contribution to the modern conception of religious liberty and liberty of conscience. However, Luther's doctrine of "Two Kingdoms" has been met with mixed reviews. To some, Luther was the "herald of European freedom" but to others he was "the forerunner of Hegel and totalitarian fascism."<sup>10</sup> Some historians see the failure of German Lutherans to oppose Hitler as reflecting the inadequacies of Luther's two kingdoms doctrine. To some German Lutherans, even Hitler was an instrument of God. These historians argue that Luther's social ethic encouraged Christians to tolerate or at least fail to oppose unjust social structures. On the other hand, American founding father James Madison credited Luther as the theorist who "led the way, between what is due Caesar and what is due to God."<sup>11</sup> The value of Luther's doctrine of "Two Kingdoms" is best summed up by historian Graham Tomlin who explained,

At its best this doctrine was a valid attempt to separate out two spheres which had become confused. In a world where the papacy and local bishops claimed political and territorial power, and where secular rulers were tempted to interfere in matters of faith, Luther wanted to insist that it was the task of rulers to rule and clergy to preach. At its worst the doctrine gave the impression that the gospel had no relevance at all to secular life and was only of significance for some inner, private sphere.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Thorsten Prill, "Martin Luther: The Two Kingdoms and the Church," *Evangel* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 18.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-22.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> James Madison, *Letters and Other Writings of James Madison* (Kessinger Publishing, 2008), 242.

<sup>12</sup> Prill, 20.

## John Calvin

Like Martin Luther, John Calvin explained the relationship between church and state with a “two kingdom” theory of his own. With his theory of religious liberty, Calvin sought to avoid the extremes of both “radical Anabaptist liberalism” and “radical Catholic legalism.” He disagreed with the perspective touted by some Anabaptists that Christian believers were not subject to civil forms of law and authority. According to Alister McGrath, Calvin rejected the Anabaptist view that the spiritual authority abrogates the political. Calvin also disagreed with the diametrically different perspective articulated by some Catholics that Christian believers were free only when they submit to law and authority.<sup>13</sup>

In his treatise entitled *On Civil Government*, Calvin writes that there are “two governments to which mankind is subject.” The first of these “rules over the soul or the inner man and concerns itself with eternal life.”<sup>14</sup> This “spiritual kingdom” serves as the realm of redemption of spiritual and eternal life where an individual functions primarily by faith, hope and charity. This “spiritual kingdom” foreshadows the perfect kingdom of Christ to come. The “civil kingdom” whose province is the “establishment of a merely civil and external justice” is the realm of creation of natural and civic life where a person functions primarily by reason, law and passion.<sup>15</sup>

Calvin describes the “civil kingdom” and “spiritual kingdom” as being quite distinct but in “no way incompatible with each other.”<sup>16</sup> He argued that their work must complement one another and that civil government or the “civil kingdom” must protect “the outward worship of God,” defend “sound doctrine” and help promote civic righteousness. Magistrates were used to

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<sup>13</sup> John Witte Jr., “Moderate Religious Liberty In The Theology of John Calvin,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 31 (1996): 360-364.

<sup>14</sup> John Calvin, “On Civil Government,” in *Luther and Calvin: On Secular Authority*, ed. Harro Hopfl (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 47.

<sup>15</sup> David Vandrunen, “The Two Kingdoms Doctrine and the Relationship of Church and State in the Early Reformed Tradition,” *Journal of Church and State* 49, no. 4 (2007): 747-748.

<sup>16</sup> Calvin, 49.

accomplish these ends through the promotion of “true religion.” Calvin assigned two roles to the magistrates: the maintenance of political and ecclesiastical order and the provision of the teaching of right doctrine. McGrath notes that for Calvin, both magistrates and ministers were committed to the same task, “the difference between them lying in the tools they had available and their respective spheres of authority.”<sup>17</sup> Entrusted with responsibilities which were complementary rather than competitive, both magistrates and ministers were agents and servants of the same God, dedicated to the same Christian gospel, differing only in their areas and methods of work. McGrath explains that while the Anabaptists regarded church discipline as a matter solely for the church, Calvin regarded it as a “matter of public concern, within the legitimate authority of the magistracy.”<sup>18</sup>

To put it mildly, Calvin’s “two-kingdoms” approach to church and state has had its fair share of critics. Roland Bainton, a well-known scholar of the Protestant Reformation, declared that “the Reformation at the outset brought no gain for religious liberty. Rather the reverse,” particularly under Calvin, “the arch-inquisitor of Protestantism” and “dictator of Geneva.” Bainton proclaimed, “If Calvin ever wrote anything in favor of religious liberty, it was a typographical error.”<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, Calvin has had his fair share of champions since America’s founding. President John Adams urged: “Let not Geneva be forgotten or despised. Religious liberty owes it much respect, Servetus notwithstanding.”<sup>20</sup> Abraham Kuyper even declared that “every competent historian will without exception confirm the words of [American historian George] Bancroft: ‘The fanatic for Calvinism was a fanatic for liberty; and, in the moral warfare for freedom, his creed was his most faithful counselor and his never failing support’.”

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<sup>17</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 231-234.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Witte, 360-361.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Servetus was burnt at the stake as a heretic in Calvin's Geneva.

Unfortunately for Kuyper, a plethora of competent historians have adamantly disagreed with his assertion.<sup>21</sup>

Church-state expert John Witte offers a more balanced evaluation of Calvin's political and legal contributions to religious liberty which he admits are "wanting" when compared against contemporary standards of freedom. Witte writes,

Calvin's writings and actions have provided a seedbed out of which has grown a whole wilderness of tangled political thorns that have strangled the growth of religious and political liberty in many quarters. Calvin's writings however, also made profound and lasting contributions to the Western legal and political tradition of religious liberty....Calvin helped to further [the Protestant Reformation's] cause of liberty, not only in Geneva but in many other quarters of Western Europe as well. His theory of the Christian conscience provided the cornerstone for the constitutional protections of liberty of conscience and free exercise of religion advocated by later Protestants in France, Holland, England, Scotland and America. His theory of moral laws and duties inspired a whole range of natural law and natural rights theories directed among other things to the protection of religious liberty. His theory of the moral responsibility of both church and state to the community lies at the heart of modern theories of social pluralism and civic republicanism.<sup>22</sup>

In light of Adams, Bainton, Bancroft, and Witte, historians and students of the Protestant Reformation must be careful not to dismiss or overlook any potential contributions of sixteenth century reformers such as Calvin to the modern conception of religious liberty.

### **The Anabaptists**

The Radical Reformation of the sixteenth century was a response to both the corruption in the Roman Catholic Church and the increasingly influential magisterial Reformation. Along with the spiritualists and evangelical rationalists, the Anabaptists were one of the three main groups

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<sup>21</sup> Witte, 360-361.

<sup>22</sup> Witte, 400-402. Witte explains that Calvin's view on liberty of conscience differed strongly from the voluntarist formulations of Marsilius of Padua. Calvin did not have in mind the freedom of the person to respond to the dictates of his or her conscience in matters of faith. Witte also noted that Calvin did not have in mind the "Enlightenment conception of liberty of conscience" defined by James Madison as the liberty to choose "the duty that we owe to our Creation and the manner of discharging it." For Calvin, liberty of conscience was merely the freedom to obey the commandments of God with a free conscience.

active in Europe's Radical Reformation.<sup>23</sup> Holding to the practice of believer's (adult) Baptism, these Anabaptists rebaptized all who had been christened as infants in the Catholic and Protestant Churches.<sup>24</sup> In search of the "New Testament Church," the Anabaptist wing of the Radical Reformation called for the reestablishment of the principles and practices of primitive Christianity.<sup>25</sup>

According to historian Alister McGrath, the Anabaptists were the only group throughout the Reformation that chose "to stand apart from this cozy relationship of church and state, believing that something vital had been compromised."<sup>26</sup> As advocates for the radical notion of a complete separation of church and state, Anabaptists clung tightly to the "doctrine of two worlds" which essentially created an ontological dualism of Christian values and values of the "world."<sup>27</sup> This two kingdoms dichotomy posited the "Kingdom of God" against the "Kingdom of Satan" (government).<sup>28</sup> Due to this comprehensive and consistent separation of the religious and political realms, Anabaptists believed that a Christian could not occupy the office of the magistrate because "the state had absolutely no rights or responsibilities of supervision, interference and coercion in the affairs of the church."<sup>29</sup> Following Christ's example, Anabaptists generally argued that violence must not be used in any circumstance. Article VI of The Schleitheim Confession, the

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<sup>23</sup> George Hunston Williams, "Radical Reformation," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, vol. 3 (New York, Oxford University Press, 1996), 375-384.

<sup>24</sup> James Robert Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation: English Separatism, Mennonite Influence, and the Elect Nation* (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 1991), 69.

<sup>25</sup> William Estep, "The Reformation: Anabaptist Style," *Criswell Theological Review* 6 (Spring 1993): 196. According to Estep, Anabaptists insisted on rebuilding the church upon the basis of the teachings of Christ and those of the apostles as reflected in the New Testament.

<sup>26</sup> McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Reformation*, 327.

<sup>27</sup> Pasichiel, 43-44.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Friedmann, "The Doctrine of the Two Worlds," in *The Recover of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed. Guy F. Herschberger (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1962), 105-106.

<sup>29</sup> Pasichiel, 43-44.

first known Anabaptist confession, declared that “the sword is an ordering of God outside the perfection of Christ.”<sup>30</sup>

Anabaptists believed the state was ordained because of sin. Recognizing the magistrates as “servants of God,” the Anabaptists insisted that the state exists to make possible an orderly society among evildoers. However, the Church was created for the saved. This understanding of the nature of the church led the Anabaptists to advocate withdrawal from political life and from worldliness. Only through a separation of church and state could the church be cleansed and freed to be the church under God.<sup>31</sup> For the Anabaptists, the disestablishment of the state churches was the minimum requirement in a guarantee of religious freedom. Hence, the Anabaptists became the first advocates in the modern era of the disestablishment of the church. According to historian William Estep, neither the Puritans nor the Separatists “had developed a clear-cut and unequivocal stance in favor of religious liberty.” Anabaptists believed that every person had the right to believe or not to believe. This concept of an uncoerced faith was what guided the Anabaptist movement for absolute religious liberty.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Baptists**

In the early seventeenth century, Baptists emerged out of the Puritan-Separatist movement in the Church of England.<sup>33</sup> The earliest Baptist leaders, John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, agreed with the emphasis of the Protestant Reformation upon the priesthood of believers and the individual conscience.<sup>34</sup> In *Differences of the Churches of the Separation*, Smyth, when arguing for a genuine “believer’s church,” said that the church is a “kingly priesthood” and that the saints

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<sup>30</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Legacy of Michael Sattler* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 19.

<sup>31</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *The Reformation* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1999), 117-119.

<sup>32</sup> William Estep, *The Anabaptist Story* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1963), 189-193.

<sup>33</sup> Though Baptists did emerge out of the Puritan-Separatist movement, some historians argue for the direct influence of sixteenth century Anabaptists upon Baptist origins in the Netherlands. Thus, these historians contend that Baptists have two parents: the English Puritan-Separatists and the Dutch Anabaptists.

<sup>34</sup> After leading a group of believers in England to migrate to Holland to avoid religious persecution, Smyth and Helwys founded the first Baptist church around 1608/1609.

(i.e. professing Christians) are “kings and priests.”<sup>35</sup> Two years after Smyth’s death, his followers produced a confession authored by Smyth which contained a strong affirmation of religious liberty (the first by a person of English descent). Advocating against a union of church and state that he had experienced in the Church of England, Smyth contended that magistrates should handle civil affairs only and “leave the Christian religion free, to every man his conscience.”<sup>36</sup> By defining civil and religious duties as being separate and distinct from one another, Smyth became a proponent for a form of church-state separation that most Baptists would champion for the next four hundred years.

Thomas Helwys’ *Mystery of Iniquity* (1612) is best known as the first treatise in England which called for complete religious liberty. In this groundbreaking document, Helwys challenged the role of the state in the affairs of the church. Helwys lambasted the Anglican Church for requiring conformity in worship and biblical interpretation. Helwys held that believers must be free to read and understand the Bible for themselves. While acknowledging the divine right of a civil government (according to Romans 13), Helwys boldly wrote, “The King is a moral man and not God, therefore no power over the immortal souls of his subjects, to make laws and ordinances for them, and to set spiritual lords over them.” According to Helwys, every person regardless of religion must be free to follow God according to the dictates of his or her conscience. In radical terms for his day, Helwys contended,

For men’s religion to God is between God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it. Neither may the king be the judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Jews, Turks or whatever, it pertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.  
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<sup>35</sup> John Smyth, “Differences of the Churches of the Separation,” in H. Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook of Baptist Heritage* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1990), 15.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Helwys, *The Mystery of Iniquity*, in McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, 72-75.

Thus, Thomas Helwys along with other early English (General) Baptists such as Leonard Busher, were catalysts in the movement for radical religious liberty in England. Led by Helwys, these General Baptists pushed aggressively for religious liberty rather than tolerance and for separation between church and state.<sup>38</sup>

While assessing the contributions of some religious groups and leaders is extremely important, this is not the case with the people known as Baptists. Without a doubt, Baptists have made significant contributions to the arena of religious liberty. From the steps of the United States Capitol in 1920, George Washington Truett declared that “Baptists, more than any other people in the world, have forever been the protagonists of religious liberty and its compatriot civil liberty.” According to historian George Bancroft, “Freedom of conscience, unlimited freedom of mind, was the first trophy of the Baptists.”<sup>39</sup> John Locke, one of the most influential thinkers of the Enlightenment, once said, “The Baptists were the first propounders of absolute liberty, just and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty.”<sup>40</sup> Baptists such as Roger Williams, John Clarke, Isaac Backus and most importantly John Leland played instrumental roles in securing religious liberty in America’s formative years. In his book, *Baptists and the American Republic*, Joseph Martin Dawson, another Baptist advocate for religious liberty concluded, “If the researchers of the world were to be asked who was most responsible for the American guaranty for religious liberty, their prompt reply would be ‘James Madison.’” However, Dawson continued, “If James Madison might answer, he would as quickly reply, ‘John Leland and the Baptists.’”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Baptists provided many of the ideas foundational to religious liberty beginning with John Smyth, Thomas

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<sup>38</sup> John Coffey, “Puritanism and Liberty Revisited: The Case for Toleration in the English Revolution,” *The Historical Journal* 41, no. 4 (December 1998): 983-985.

<sup>39</sup> George Washington Truett, “Baptists and Religious Liberty,” in *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, ed. H. Leon McBeth (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 466-477.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Martin Dawson, *Baptist and the American Republic* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1956), 117.

Helwys and the General Baptists of England and they contributed immensely to the public agitation which led to the Bill of Rights.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The ideas and doctrines which sprung from the Protestant Reformation were undoubtedly extremely influential to the formation of the modern conception of religious liberty and its political corollary, the separation of church and state. Luther's rediscovery of the New Testament doctrine known as "priesthood of all believers" was foundational to the radical notions that church and state should not interfere in the affairs of one another and that faith must always be free and uncoerced. Though credit should be given where credit is due, we must be careful not to bestow Luther with too much credit in the arena of religious liberty. As was previously demonstrated, Luther's doctrine of "Two Kingdoms," has a mixed track record. Further, Luther failed to take such doctrines as "priesthood of all believers" to their logical conclusion in the political arena. Instead of recognizing that Christ's religion needs no prop from any worldly source, Luther set in place an established state church system where the state ultimately dominated the church.

We would be remiss not to acknowledge John Calvin's contributions to political theory, especially with respect to natural law. However, Calvin's contribution to the modern conception of religious liberty is severely limited. When compared to the radical religious liberty being championed by those from the "free church" tradition, one finds Calvin's "two-kingdoms" approach lacking. Taking into consideration Calvin's actions in the case of Michael Servetus, it is difficult to overlook his intolerance. The Puritans of colonial America, heirs of Calvin's theology, came to this country, in part, to exercise religious freedom. However, their implementation of Calvin's Holy Commonwealth demanded religious conformity and persecuted dissenters like Roger Williams, Anne Hutchison and the Quaker Mary Dyer. Williams' forced exit from Massachusetts provided the context for his creation of Rhode Island upon the foundation of

religious liberty for all. Puritans, however, viewed the new colony as a cesspool of dissent.

The Anabaptists' radical view of absolute religious liberty is to be admired. However, their "doctrine of two worlds" allowed the Anabaptists to isolate themselves from society. This doctrine kept the Anabaptists from having any meaningful influence on the evolution of religious liberty in the Western world. However, William Estep has argued that the contributions of Anabaptists to the modern view of religious liberty have been overlooked by historians. Estep has theorized that the early Baptists were significantly influenced by Anabaptist views on religious liberty. Thus, he proposes that Anabaptist contributions can be seen through the undeniable Baptist contributions to religious liberty and the separation of church and state. However, his argument that Anabaptists deserve more credit only holds up if his theory on Baptist origins does not fail. Unfortunately for Estep, the overwhelming majority of Baptist historians reject his claim of significant and direct Anabaptist influence on the church and state views of the early Baptists.

For four hundred years, Baptists have emphasized such ideas as liberty of conscience, religious liberty and the separation of church and state. While not every Baptist was as radical or consistent as John Leland of colonial Virginia in his application of church-state separation, the role of Baptists in securing religious liberty in the United States is undeniable. Baptists were able to do what Martin Luther and the English Separatists did not do. They took the New Testament doctrine of "priesthood of all believers" to its logical conclusion which is religious liberty for all and a free church in a free state. While the contributions of Baptists have not been overlooked, champions of religious freedom must make sure that they are never forgotten. Without question, the modern conception of religious liberty cannot be adequately understood without recognizing the contributions of the different streams of the Protestant Reformation.